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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [JA](#) [TH](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Peace Process Update: Fourth round of talks
kicks off; PM's address to nation; Japanese FM's visit

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS 01/06/03 Fax

- (B) Oslo 16
- (C) Colombo 14, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) This update of Sri Lanka's peace process reviews the following:

>> Fourth round of GSL-LTTE talks begins in Thailand

>> Muslim leader Hakeem attends talks as part of GSL team -- and takes other Muslims with him

>> In nationally televised address, Prime Minister reviews progress of GSL's peace initiative

>> In visit, Foreign Minister Kawaguchi underscores Japan's support for peace process

Start of Fourth Round of Talks

[1](#)2. (U) The fourth round of Norwegian-facilitated talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began at a resort hotel in the Bangkok area on January 6. (Note: The last round of talks took place in Oslo in early December. The previous two rounds took place in Thailand in September and November.) The talks are scheduled to continue until January 9, with a press briefing slated to take place on January 10. The first day of talks seems to have taken place in a cordial atmosphere. Photos and TV news feed of the brief opening ceremony showed GSL and LTTE team members standing together and grinning, apparently in a relaxed mood.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In a press briefing late January 6, G.L. Peiris, a senior GSL minister and key negotiator, set an optimistic tone and related that the first day mainly involved developing an agenda for the rest of the discussions. As foreshadowed in Refs B and C, Peiris stated that the key agenda items were the Sri Lankan military's "high security zones" in Jaffna and human rights in LTTE-controlled areas. Before talks wrapped up on January 6, the two sides had also begun substantive discussions on humanitarian/resettlement issues, including prioritization of assistance projects and how to handle pledges by donors.

[1](#)4. (C) COMMENT: Entering this round of talks, there were concerns that the two sides would not hit it off because of recent disagreements over the Jaffna security zones (see Ref C). So far, however, it appears that the government and the Tigers are striving to make things work. In fact, it's almost as if they want to prove the peace process skeptics back home wrong. If that spirit prevails, it seems likely that the Norwegians will be able to put together a positive joint communique at the end of the talks, allowing the process as a whole to maintain its momentum. END COMMENT.

Muslim Leader Attends Talks, Gains "Advisers"

[1](#)5. (SBU) After weeks of confusion, embattled Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader (and senior GSL minister) Raul Hakeem is participating in the Thailand talks as a member of the government delegation. (Note: Hakeem was a member of the GSL team at the first three rounds of talks. He had to leave the third round of talks in Oslo in December early because a group of party rebels was threatening to eject him from the SLMC leadership.) In a new development, three other Muslims have joined Hakeem in Thailand. The three -- M.L.M. Cader, H.S.

Hasbullah, and M.I.M. Mohiudeen -- are reportedly serving in an "advisory" capacity and not directly participating in the talks. (Note: Cader and Hasbullah are educators, who -- along with Hakeem -- are former IVP grantees. Mohiuddin is also well-known, having been involved in Muslim politics in the east for years.)

16. (C) Asked about the addition of the three Muslim advisers, M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, a senior MP for the Muslim National Unity Alliance (NUA), told us that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, reacting to complaints by other Muslims, had essentially ordered Hakeem to bring additional members of the community with him to Thailand. Hizbullah commented that he and other Muslims continued to demand that their community be granted third party status at the talks and not remain part of the government's team.

17. (C) COMMENT: Although it's a victory of sorts that he is even in Thailand, Hakeem is clearly struggling politically. Despite his best efforts, he has not been able to quell the protests that he is not attentive enough to the needs of eastern Muslims. In addition, criticism from his many SLMC opponents continues to flare. Although he has seemingly gained an edge in the party leadership battle, both sides are still heavily involved in litigation and it is not clear where the chips will fall. In the meantime -- and in another humbling experience, Hakeem has been forced to bite the bullet and accept the three advisers. Given the confluence of events, it seems that Hakeem is well on the way to being marginalized unless he does something in short order that halts the erosion in his support. END COMMENT.

PM Addresses Nation

18. (SBU) On the evening of January 5, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe gave a nationally televised address. (Note: Ref A contains a text of the speech.) In essence, the address was of the "State of the Union"-type in which the PM reviewed what he considered his coalition's major successes of the past year. Three major points emerged: First, the PM stated that the peace process was at a "decisive moment" and that it was now time to start making a transition to a permanent peace. Second, he reached out to President Kumaratunga, urging her to work with him to make peace possible. Third, the PM used part of the speech to underline the GSL's commitment to economic growth and reform.

19. (C) The address received mostly favorable press play in papers the next day. The President's Office and her People's Alliance party had no immediate comment on the speech. As could be expected, the radical JVP party harshly criticized it, asserting that the peace process was only working in favor of the LTTE. (Note: More humorously, the JVP also asserted that the PM was wrong to wear the "kit of George Bush," i.e., a coat and tie, during the speech, and not local dress.) Asked for his reaction to the speech, Jehan Perera, the head of the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, commented that he thought the speech was constructive in that it was "conciliatory" toward the president, which was positive in terms of easing cohabitation strains.

110. (C) COMMENT: Although their peace initiative has been amazingly successful, one area where the PM and his government have been criticized is with respect to public relations. Despite much advice, the PM and his major advisers have not taken to the airwaves in any sustained way to explain the peace process and solidify support for the GSL's efforts. The lack of such an effort has not been too much of a problem thus far, but could be in the future if the process hits bumps in the road. Wickremesinghe's speech seemed to go a way toward helping plug the public relations gap, but it is still not clear whether it will be part of a longer-term effort. END COMMENT.

Visit of Japanese FM

111. (SBU) Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi visited Sri Lanka, January 5-7. In Colombo, Kawaguchi met with President Kumaratunga, the Prime Minister, and Foreign Minister Fernando. She also visited the war-ravaged Jaffna area. While in Jaffna, she promised augmented Japanese rehabilitation assistance, including funding for demining. Noting that it was the first visit by a Japanese FM to Sri Lanka in 16 years, Koji Yagi, a Japanese Embassy poloff, told us that the trip went extremely well. He added that a key area of focus

in GSL-GOJ discussions during the visit involved a review of modalities for the Sri Lanka donor conference being hosted by the Japanese government in the June timeframe.

112. (C) COMMENT: Japan has been trying to play a more important role in Sri Lanka's peace process for some time and Kawaguchi's visit fits into that mold. One aspect of the visit that received significant local coverage centered on comments by Hatsuhisa Takashima, an assistant of Kawaguchi's, who was quoted as repeatedly assuring press conference participants that Kawaguchi will carefully brief the GoI on the results of her visit to Sri Lanka (India is her next stop). In very solicitous remarks, Takashima went on to add that the GoJ would ask India for its views about an invitation Special Envoy Yasushi Akashi had received from the LTTE inviting him to visit areas under its control. (Note: Per Reftels: According to various sources, the Indian government has not welcomed Japan's attempts to enhance its involvement in Sri Lanka-related issues.) END COMMENT.

113. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS